Chaucer's View of Fourteenth Century English Chivalry As Seen through The Canterbury Tales and through the Contemporary Socio-Political Viewpoint of the Hundred Years War

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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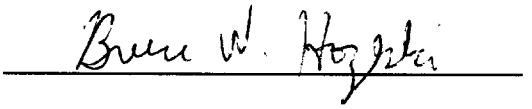

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Purpose of Thesis

This thesis is a discussion of how Geoffrey Chaucer uses four of his Canterbury Tales to show how the Hundred Years War brought a decline to the chivalric values of fourteenth century England. This paper explains how Chaucer uses the public opinion of his day to describe the feelings of the war with France as an influence to the king. It will explain how Chaucer uses satire in the "Knight's Tale" to show how knighthood had become mercenary and had lost all of it chivalric flavor. He continues with the "Squire's Tale" to explain how the exotic East had influenced the young men hoping to become knights. Finally, this thesis will discuss how Chaucer makes a plea for peace with France through the "Tale of Sir Thopas" and through the "Tale of Melibee."

Chaucer's View of Fourteenth Century English Chivalry As Seen through The Canterbury Tales and through the Contemporary Socio-Political Viewpoint of the Hundred Years War

During the Hundred Years War different nations were developing more modern war tactics. Slowly, the highly effective canon was replacing the chivalric knight in his shining armor. Also, the Renaissance brought in new thoughts and a new way of life in European economics. The rising middle class paved the road for the first sparks of democracy that would fully develop in the immediate centuries ahead. With these changes in civilization, chivalry was slowly fading away.

Geoffrey Chaucer in The Canterbury Tales writes of an overview of late fourteenth century society and of this change in Europe. The author includes a view of the decline of chivalry and the misfortunes that this decline brought with the Hundred Years War through "The Knight's Tale" and expands upon this further with "The Squire's Tale," and the pilgrim-Chaucer's own two tales, "The Tale of Sir Thopas," and "The Tale of Melibee." Although for decades critics have faithfully defended the Knight and his tale as a supreme example of chivalry, one simply cannot overlook that chivalry was declining in Chaucer's day and that the tale is full of satire and humorous elements that discredit such a "noble" segment of medieval society. Furthermore, why would

Chaucer include a portrait of a young man who gave chivalry an exotic view, a portrait of a fumbling idiot who believes himself to be the next Sir Lancelot, and a portrait of a man who decides to forgive his enemies and not go to war? These questions repeat themselves throughout the Canterbury Tales in relationship to Chaucer's history when England was continually fighting against France and when Christendom was fighting against the infidels in the East.

To understand what was occurring in Chaucer's England, one must study the political backgrounds and the society in which Chaucer lived. Chaucer lived his entire life during what would later be known as the "Hundred Years War". Historians believe that this series of wars originated with a conflict between Edward III, who inherited the French duchy of Guyenne, and his French lord, King Philip VI (Barnie 4). When Philip announced on 24 May 1337 that Edward had given up Guyenne, Edward responded in October of the same year by claiming the French throne for himself (Seward 35). Edward received his claim to France through his mother, Isabella, daughter of King Philip IV of France (Goodman 229). Like most wars, the nation rallied behind their king. "Contemporary opinion certainly recognized the importance of the quarrel over the duchy. Edward's homage to the French king aroused bitter comment and disapproval" (Barnie 4). In 1346 after the defeat of the French at Caen, England captured Philip's ordonnance of 1339 which planned

for an invasion of England. Edward used this to gather support by having the Archbishop of Canterbury read the document in St. Paul's and had other copies read at every parish in the country (Seward 59-60). By causing a common hatred of Edward's enemy, the king was successful in making his cause just by involving the entire nation. He made the war not just a grudge against Philip's taking his land in France, but the English king made it a common cause because Philip had plans to invade their sacred island. Edward also had the government's support because the Parliament Roll tells how pleased it was (the political leaders) with the early victories and in believing the money that the government gave for the war was well spent (Seward 71). Later battles brought victories for England, such as the ones at Sluis, Poitiers, and Crécy (Goodmen 230, 232-3). However, future misfortunes were to cause disappointment among the English people.

Because of the early successes in the war, England had enjoyed two decades of spoils, but soon the cost of running the war, such as payments to allies and the maintenance of the militia, caused "a strain on the nation's resources when national production and income were falling" (Barnie 14). Edward was quickly becoming unpopular among his subjects, especially in Parliament, because of his lifestyle in his later years and because his mistress Alice Perrers had a very strong hold on the king's political moves (Goodman 173-

4). However, the Black Prince remained and even grew more popular. Many English considered the heir just because he supported the Commons' hopes for reform during the Good Parliament (Barnie 20). The Good Parliament took place in 1376, and in this session Parliament sought a way of curing the country from the king's monetary affairs (Goodman 65, 164).

In that same year, Fortune cruelly destroyed England's hopes for a more secure future because the heir to the English throne suddenly became ill and died.

> "It was . . . the desire of all England as well as of the aging monarch, that the Black Prince should rule after him. Deprived of their prince the English must place their trust in God alone. (qtd. in Barnie 20)"

The loss of a hopeful future distresses the people of a nation when that country relies on that future. Because of the death of the Black Prince, England's future was not to be happy. Edward III died in 1377, and his grandson, Richard, became king while still a minor. Richard's uncles, especially John of Gaunt, were to rule England until Richard declared himself of age in May of 1389 (Goodman 174-5, 195).

Richard's reign saw no significant victory against France, and soon the people of England desired peace with France in hopes of saving themselves from high taxes and French raids on the English coast (Robertson, "Probable

Date" 419). When Richard announced that he had become of age, he instantly proceeded to negotiate with France for a three year truce (420). "During the later 1380s and 1390s the desire to remain 'in peace' was to be strengthened by a growing conviction that prosperity depended on an end to the war with France" (Barnie 24). These are two of the several decades in which Chaucer was serving the courts of Edward III and Richard II (Howard, Chaucer 332, 444). As a member of the court, Chaucer would have known what was going on politically and would have known the desires of the English people were. Many people who served the court or who were involved with the government understood what was occurring with present events (Barnie 32).

Men who had lived their entire lives during the war began to think about what it was really about. They also considered what was occurring in the country itself and wondered what it would take to reform England (Barnie 116). Perhaps, Chaucer was one of these men who did consider what was to be done in restoring England. Chaucer knew he had a gift of verse and must have thought the best way to help save England was for him to write about the problems and the possible solutions in his writings, most notably the Canterbury Tales.

> But it is equally clear that Chaucer was aware that what he was writing might be interpreted so as to bear on contemporary English matters: for

> example, he suppresses a passage on the misfortunes which could befall a kingdom ruled by a child--presumably in order to avoid the impression that he was being critical of Richard II. (Scattergood 292)

Chaucer's friend, John Gower, had asked God for peace between the two countries and Chaucer appears to have had the same convictions except for the fact that he did not directly state his desires or beliefs (Barnie 131).

Because Chaucer was aware of what was happening in England, it makes perfect sense that he should use his writings to sway public opinion. Today, many "celebrities" use their influence in supporting their favorite causes. Could this practice have been possible in the fourteenth century as it is today? From the Canterbury Tales, the reader comprehends the social history of Chaucer's England and may view the work as a piece of realism (Nevo 10). Muscatine strongly believes that the time of the Tales was a time of great crisis for the island (Pearsall 140-1). With these two thoughts in mind, Chaucer must have written the Canterbury Tales in hopes of persuading a new life for England.

To begin this analysis of the tales themselves, it is best to start with the pilgrim who many critics consider a most noble man--the Knight. The traditional point of view given by critics in that "The Knight's Tale" is a metrical

romance filled with courtly love and "chivalric codified rules and rites" (Thurston 7). On the surface, this may all be true. Yes, in the tale, courtly love does appear to exist. Palamon and Arcite fight for the woman they love through a tournament. The critics of the tale exalt the heroes, especially Theseus. For example, at the beginning of the tale, Theseus comes home after defeating the Amazons only to meet with a group of women who need his help (Robinson ll. 893-951). Theseus appears a great hero and a "worthy knight" himself. However, one must read thoughtfully through the text to find what Chaucer really is saying. For example, Chaucer writes of when Theseus' army defeats Creon of the Athenians "ransacking" through the Theban dead (ll. 1005-6). This does not appear very chivalrous of a victorious army to treat the dead with such little respect. Is that not the reason Theseus went against Creon?

Also, when one reads the description of the Knight in "The General Prologue," he or she can easily and mistakenly take Chaucer's knight to be the epitome of chivalry. One may read in the "General Prologue" that the Knight was "a worthy man. . . who loved chivalrie,/ Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie" (ll. 44-46). Chaucer writes of a knight that reads to be gentle; however, the Knight is a warrior who has fought in many battles. In one of those battles, he must have killed a few men. For someone to have

the capacity within themselves to kill another human being is a contradictory statement. Some believe: "'it is worthy of note that Chaucer presents in the Knight a completely ideal figure. Although chivalry in the fourteenth century was in its decline and had a very sordid side, Chaucer has wholly refrained from satirizing the institution'" (qtd. in Jones 1). Then why would Chaucer give a laughable ending to a tale that should require sensitivity? Palamon wins Emily, but he has a freak accident and falls off his horse only to die in vain. Finally, to say that Chaucer "wholly refrained from satirizing" is very narrow-minded. The Knight also might hold an ambiguous definition of what "worthiness" meant. Chaucer uses this word in his description of his knight in line 43 of the "Prologue". Today, one thinks of worthiness simply to mean "bravery"; however, in Chaucer's day the word could have meant that someone was simply an experienced warrior (Hatton, "Chaucer's Crusading" 78).

By Chaucer's time, knighthood and chivalry were quickly declining. According to Terry Jones, the word "knight" had several different meanings by the late middle ages. The word could mean a chivalrous warrior-hero, military strength, or a means of taxing (4). Many in the poet's day would have considered a knight as illustrious and successful as Chaucer's knight is a very important and prominent person. Perhaps what the traditionalists see as the "ideal" meaning actually means something entirely different. One

does not read of the Knight himself in any service of a lady love, and one does not read the knight to be in direct service to his king. Instead, he continually joins in the Crusades to fight. As for the Knight telling a courtly tale, perhaps he is telling what he believes is expected of him.

Besides an ambiguous meaning of what a knight was and how worthy he proved himself in the late middle ages, warfare and its impact on the knight critically changed. These "changes. . . had chiefly to do with the virtual absence of crusading as a fundamental objective from the center of national military enterprise" (Middleton 120). No longer was the knight in the late middle ages going to crusade against an infidel in the name of Christendom. The Christian forces had lost Jerusalem without much hope of regaining the city. The glory and honor of a crusading knight had almost completely disappeared by Chaucer's time. In the fourteenth century, chivalry linked with the Crusades was completely corrupt (Hatton, "Chaucer's Crusading" 83). If a knight could not win for God, why not win for himself and his purse?

England in Chaucer's time saw the rise of the soldier of fortune. "To Chaucer's contemporaries, the growth of the mercenary soldier represented, in the most dramatic terms possible, the general erosion of social values" (Jones 13). Could Chaucer's knight have been a mercenary? The poet does

list battle after battle that the Knight has fought. For example, he fought at "Algezir" and "Tramyssene" (ll. 56-66). This knight has fought in so many battles that it appears that he is a noble knight who is fighting for Christendom. However, he is not fighting only for a just reason but for the gain of riches and the opportunity to fight (Howard, Chaucer 415). No place in Chaucer's world existed for the once perfect knight. Modern warfare had squeezed the once valiant knight out of history, and the growing influence of commerce in Europe was suffocating his existence out of the picture (Manly 47). If commerce was replacing knighthood, it would make sense for a knight to join in for a strong profit. The men who were at Alexandria brought home precious gems and luxuries that English merchants found to be profitable (Robertson, Chaucer's 129). Why should the knight care about the chivalry that once existed? To be a knight in his time was far more profitable than attaining a lady's devotion that might not last very long.

To further analyze Chaucer's knight, the reader must be aware that the poet does not write about any coat of arms for his worthy hero. A true, ideal knight would have a coat of arms. A knight would have been proud to show his coat of arms because this was his heritage. It was him; it was his family. A coat of arms represented what the knight accomplished in the service of his king. If Chaucer had

been so willing to have described in such vivid detail the condition in which the Knight appeared, it would only make sense to give him a coat of arms. Unless the Knight did not possess a coat of arms; he was not a noble knight.

If the Knight and his tale do not show the ideal nature of what chivalry expects from its knights, then what is the Knight and "The Knight's Tale" all about? The tale is about the decline of chivalry seen through Chaucer's eyes. He uses satire to show readers that English society in the late fourteenth century was not what it appeared to be. Donald R. Howard writes:

> The true ideals of the "ideal" pilgrim--the Knight's crusading spirit, the brotherhood of Parson and Plowman, perhaps the Clerk's selfless dedication--seem obsolescent. And the tales told by these ideal pilgrims do not reflect the lust which the ideal is presumed to have had in better days. In the Knight's tale an undercurrent of comic irony and a certain number of ridiculous circumstances or anticlimaxes undercut the romance idealism (The Idea 113).

But how and where does Chaucer bring down the lofty idealism of chivalry? The satire exits within the story-teller himself and the characterizations of Arcite, Palamon, and Emily.

One must realize who is telling the tale. As stated

before, the Knight in The Canterbury Tales is a knight without a coat of arms, and this clearly shows throughout the tale. Terry Jones believes that Arcite and Palamon are uncourtly in the love that they feel for Emily. Their love toward Emily is also "self-centered" (155). For example, in the tale, when Theseus releases Arcite from prison, the young man does not immediately fight for Emily. Instead, he whines and cries about how he will never see her again (ll. 1219-1274). This scene is completely unchivalrous because Arcite does not think of his lady; he thinks about his own suffering. Because the tale is coming from someone like Chaucer's knight, this makes perfect sense. The Knight is a person who is used to thinking only about himself. The Knight is unable to think in courtly terms because he himself is not a courtly person. His own personality is seeping in throughout the tale. Also, as stated earlier, Palamon and Arcite are fighting over a woman for no practical reason. They do not defend her in anyway; they want to possess her, and each assumes that she will accept him and refuses the other. In fact, Emily does not want either because she prays to Diana for help in keeping her chastity (ll. 2273-2306).

One must give credit to the Knight, however, for trying because "he is a man who yearns after the courtly trappings of knighthood but who has, himself, no courtly background, no education and little understanding of. . . chivalric

code" (Jones 145). It is funny that the Knight is trying so hard to be what he believes himself to be. However, he makes so many mistakes as stated above, and what is so unfortunate is that the other pilgrims believe that he is the epitome of chivalric knighthood. For example, at the end of the "General Prologue," the Host addresses the Knight as "My mayster and my lord" (ll. 837-8). The other pilgrims regard him with the upmost of respect for no true reason.

Chaucer creates ambiguity with the traditionalist's, those who believe that the Knight is the epitome of chivalry, point of view and with those who believe that the Knight and his tale are satirical. Some critics believe that this ambiguity is what carries the satire in the tale (Kindrick 668). Chaucer created the unchivalrous knight to tell a tale of great romance and chivalry. As stated above, the Knight has failed in his portrayal of love. To continue with his failures, the Knight creates an ambiguity/satire with the rhetoric in the tale (668). This uneducated knight tells his courtly tale in the most uncourtly of language. The Knight starts with language of pomp and ceremony. For example, Chaucer writes "Whilom, as olde stories tellen us./Ther was a duc that highte Theseus" (ll. 859-60). However, the Knight turns to the colloquial "felawe" (l. 890) which was used in Chaucer's day by the lower classes (Jones 169). Even in his opening lines, the Knight gives a contrasting view of Hippolyta. In line 82, the pilgrim

calls Theseus' bride "The faire, hardy queene." Yes, she is the queen of the Amazons, but it seems that if one wishes to tell tales of courtly love, he should leave out words like "hardy" that show the lady as a rough and tumble laborer. "Hardy" takes away from the eloquence of "faire." The statement makes the tale less romantic; it gives a vision of a female wrestler. The Knight creates an ambiguity that makes the reader question how courtly the Knight truly is.

The poet shows us that the Knight is not a courtly knight. Instead, Chaucer's knight is from the lower-class that has only hopes and aspirations of becoming something that is fading away. This was not uncommon though. At this point in history, many lower to middle-class men were becoming successful knights and held strong positions within their armies. For example, Walter Manny had come from Hainault with Edward's queen as a carver and served as a commander during the war with France (Seward 30). Knights no longer fought for the lady they loved; they fought for themselves--for money. Perhaps, Chaucer is trying to show us that the knight of his day was only interested in war and knew nothing of chivalry, and that the author was sick of war and trying to downplay the mercenary. This would make sense because in his own tale, Chaucer, the pilgrim, writes of peaceful resolutions in "Melibee" (Jones 145).

Why does Chaucer portray the Knight in this fashion? Chaucer realized what was happening to chivalry in his day.

He realized that the days of tournaments and crusades were numbered and that the ideals of knighthood had turned from something beautiful and romantic to something mercenary and ugly. Perhaps, Chaucer had witnessed the ugliness of war that had lasted all of his life--most notably with France. Chaucer fought the war with France and was captured by the enemy (Howard, Chaucer 71-2). He would have had the opportunity to experience first hand how ugly such a beautiful ideal could be. Also, many during Chaucer's age blamed the decay of society on the knighthood because the people believed that the knights had only prolonged the war with France (Barnie 121). Nowhere in the Canterbury Tales does Chaucer truly ever glorify chivalry. Something satiric or pleading about the society in which Chaucer lived always exists.

Furthermore, Chaucer hoped to remind his audience of what chivalry had been originally before the mercenary. In the "Knight's Tale" Chaucer writes the tournament between Arcite and Palamon so "unlike other tournaments Chaucer would have witnessed throughout the last quarter of the fourteenth century" (Cowgill 672). Armies of one hundred men on each side and a wide assortment of weapons fill the "Knight's Tale." This sort of battle was popular during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (673). Why is Chaucer resorting to an older form of tournament? Cowgill explains that Chaucer wanted to show his readers of the decadence

that was occurring in fourteenth century knighthood (673). As stated before, the knights during the Hundred Years War created a decadence that helped to destroy the estate, and this is the very reason Chaucer does not insert the Hundred Year's War into the "Knight's Tale". Chaucer wanted to focus on peace with France and to leave behind all the knights who had been giving chivalry a bad reputation, and, therefore, wished to remind England of the glory days of chivalry that no longer existed (Cowgill 673-4).

The next pilgrim "en route" is the Knight's son, the Squire. Chaucer gives the young man a completely different description than that of his father. One reads in the "General Prologue that he has curly hair (l. 81) and "short was his gowne, with sleves longe and wyde" (l. 93). This dress "identifies a courtly fashion and distinguishes him from his father, who is dressed for battle" (Howard, Chaucer 412). The Squire's appearance obviously concerns him very much. His father who just rode from battle continues to wear his rusty mail, but the Squire looks perfect. Perhaps, he is more concerned with his looks than the profession that he has entered. The way the Squire dresses also makes a statement on how he views himself in relation to society. He "slavishly" follows all of the styles and past-times of his day. He enjoys songs, poetry, and dancing (Fehrenbach 7). He sees himself according to the way in which a courtly lover is supposed to look like. However, he seems to overdo

it to the point where it becomes pretentious.

To continue, the colors he has chosen also represent something important. In the "General Prologue," the poet writes "Embrouded was he, as it were a meede/ Al ful of fresshe floures, wyte and reede" (ll. 89-90). According to Robert J. Fehrenbach, white and red were worn by squires who were ready to be elevated to knighthood (5). By wearing red and white, perhaps the young squire was ready for knighthood and saw himself almost equal to his father. He realizes that he must still serve before his father, but he also realizes that he is more than just a squire which, is obvious throughout his tale.

When one examines the "General Prologue," the reader will realize that the Squire has only been on one campaign and that campaign was not a big success. "He has been on 'chivachie' in Flanders, Artois, and Picardy, which would have been recognized as the scandalous 'crusade' led by the bishop of Norwich, now wryly known as 'The Glorious Campaign'" (Howard, Chaucer 412). From Howard's words we get a connotation that this "Glorious Campaign" was a failure. Stanley J. Kahrl examines the campaign and the Squire's participation in this expedition in his article "The Squire's Tale and the Decline of Chivalry." He writes that the campaign "for purely political reasons, ostensibly against the Clementists in northern France, but more particularly to relieve the French pressure on Flanders. In

neither aim was it successful" (208). Furthermore, young men who participated in this failure did so for the "same greed for worldly treasure and physical delight that motivates the Squire" (Hatton, "Thematic" 456). For the Squire to participate in such a scandalous raid is not very praiseworthy. To be connected with such worldly men makes the Squire suffer a worldliness that is suffocating the profession in which he wishes to enter. This, combined with his social-climbing attitude, does not give him much credibility as a squire who is working hard at becoming a knight. Kahrl also writes that the Squire's participation in the campaign is "a good example of much of the highly unchivalrous fighting of the Hundred Year' War" (208). Like his father's unchivalrous life, the Squire's movement from chivalry shows the decline of chivalry in the late fourteenth century.

The Squire as a member of the gentility sees himself above the rest of the pilgrims, except his father, to whom he sees himself as equal. Therefore, he must tell a tale as great as his father's tale. "Beyond his desire to acquit himself well, it is his wish to do credit to his caste. Closely linked to this motive is his natural wish at once to compliment and to surpass his father" (Neville 169). Throughout the Canterbury Tales, the Knight is treated with respect, especially by the Host. As a young, aspiring knight, it is only natural that the Squire would expect to

receive the same respect that his father receives.

Also, the Squire wishes to be like his father, a knight that he believes to be the supreme example of a good, humble knight who has fought in many successful campaigns; therefore, the Squire tries to tell a tale just like his father's. "The openings of the 'Squire's Tale' and the 'Knight's Tale' are so much alike as to suggest that Chaucer means his readers to know that the Squire is in a sense plagiarizing his father" (Neville 170). Both tales open in a very dramatic sense. The "Knight's Tale" opens with "Whilom, as olde stories tellen us,/ Ther was a duc that highte Theseus; of Atthenes he was lord and governour/ And in his tyme swich a conquerour" (ll. 859-862). The "Squire's Tale" opens with "At Sarray, in the land of Tartarye,/ ther dewlte a kyng that werreyed Russye" (ll. 9-10). Both openings start with an introduction of who was reigning the land and both make the ruler a grand object of prominence. They just do not rule, but they are also successful in battle. The Squire obviously sees what his father has done and believes that he must do likewise to have a successful tale. However, this does not allow the new generation of chivalrous knights to develop for themselves. They do not know how to act as knights should because the ideal of chivalry is quickly dying.

However, one must wonder from the young man's attitude of how sincere and gentle he really is or wants to be. The

way the Squire talks to the other pilgrims makes him sound like a snob, but with no good reason. Before he starts his tale, he warns his audience that he is unable to tell a great tale; however, when one usually gives such a warning, his modesty is often false and he believes that the English language is not good enough for the tale he wishes to tell (Kahrl 202). Obviously, the Squire wants his tale associated with appearances. He makes himself sound as humble as his father and chooses an elevated language that makes him appear so worldly. Also, "the hint of snobbery. . . is more than borne out by the numerous sneering references to the speculations of the 'lewed peple' on the nature of the marvelous gifts" (203). The Squire is patronizing toward the "common" folk in that he does not believe they understand what the knight represents. For example, between lines 202 and 210 of the "Squire's Tale," the people of the land question if the knight's horse is Pegasus or the horse that destroyed the Trojans. The people show a common-folk attitude in their amazement. With the Squire's snobbery, Chaucer shows how foolish the chivalrous factor in society could look. The Squire is not a full-fledged knight; he still must prove himself worthy enough. With this fact, he has no right to believe himself superior to the other pilgrims.

In the "Squire's Tale," the story-teller wishes to tell a high-romance. As mentioned before, the Squire wishes to

equal or even to outdo his father.

> If the "The Knight's Tale" is a celebration of classical order in the chivalric world, the "Squire's Tale" presents the growing impulse toward exoticism and disorder at work in the courts of late medieval Europe" (Kahrl 195).

With his chaotic disorder, the Squire shows the growing interest of the exotic east that explorers and warriors were discovering during the Crusades. It was this interest in the East from Marco Polo's and other travelers' reports that fired the imagination of those in Europe (198). By doing this, the Squire is showing how the wealth and luxury of the Crusades is turning his head against the true ideals of chivalry and destroying all of the reverence chivalry had held during the life of the Black Prince.

The Squire's exoticism shows through in the setting of the tale (Kahrl 198). He tells of a far off land with inhabitants that have very elaborate names. For example, the king's name is "Cambyuskan," and his daughter's name is "Canace." This stimulates in one's head the idea of a very rich and exotic land--something that should not be on the mind of a future knight. Knights should be thinking of the glory of God and of the woman whose service they were entirely devoted. Also, the gifts that the stranger gives are very rich ornaments. For example, the knight gives Canace a ring that allows her to talk and to understand any

bird in the sky (ll. 146-150). This is no ordinary gift; it is as mysterious and fascinating as the Orient would have been to the Europeans of Chaucer's age.

In the "Knight's Tale," the Knight structures everything beautifully. During the battle for Emily, both sides pray to a god in a well-ordered temple and both armies are equally represented by a great warrior-king and an equal army. However, the Squire tells a tale of a place that is far-away and unfamiliar. He tells of gifts that no one, not even the commoners in the tale, can recognize. With these gifts, it becomes confusing for the hearer or the reader to understand what is going on. To tell a fanciful tale that the listeners and readers have a hard time understanding, makes the Squire appear pretentious. The tale makes the young man appear that he is expected to tell a grand tale because he is of assumed noble origins. Kahrl continues that the Squire is only interested in telling a tale that creates a certain effect rather than a tale that consists of "a coherent narrative" (196).

From the Squire's disorder comes satire.

> Foremost among them are the Squire's rhetorical advances and collapses, his total inability to hold a narrative line, his empty fluency of comment and detail which explode, exactly in the middle of the tale, in that <u>galpyng mouth</u> of <u>the norice of digestioun the sleepe</u> which divides an

> incredible night from an absurd morning
> (Seymour 312).

Chaucer does not allow the Squire to tell a flowing tale that is coherent because it would break his idea of the decline of chivalry. With the Squire unable to tell a good tell, the poet is able to make the Squire look foolish. Chaucer gives his readers a Squire that is only capable of succeeding in the social graces. "In his tale it is just these social arts which are emphasized" (Neville 174). The Squire tells a tale of feasts and hunts that would be expected of him; however, he is unable to make a coherent and effective tale that the pilgrims would enjoy or would have expected from a member of the gentility.

To conclude with the Squire and Chaucer's idea of chivalry in fourteenth century England, one must take what Chaucer is doing with the Squire and his tale and compare it to what was actually occurring with chivalry in the poet's life. "'The vitality of the chivalric tradition depended upon the preservation of those points of contact between the ideal and the actual in the world of affairs'" (qtd. in Kahrl 208). Unfortunately, the Squire is not in touch with the reality of his world. Instead, he sees within himself according to how he believes society expects him to act regardless of what is truly chivalrous. He is in love with a world full of eastern exoticism. Also, the Squire participated in a campaign that was hopelessly unsuccessful;

therefore, one cannot consider him a true knight. He must still prove himself, but he wishes to see himself equal to his father. His father is not much of a role model due to the fact that as stated before he himself is not much of what a knight should be.

Chaucer uses knighthood to show what was happening during the Crusades and especially during the Hundred Years War. However, further into the Canterbury Tales, he writes of a middle-class man who uses other classes to make the same point as the poet was doing with the knightly class. This man is Chaucer, the pilgrim, who during the pilgrimage will tell two tales of his own. First, he tells "The Tale of Sir Thopas," and when the host tells him to stop, Chaucer gives a lengthy account on peace and revenge in "The Tale of Melibee." During the writing of the Tales, Chaucer was going through a dark period of his life and "he evidently began the work as an escape from the outward and inward pressures of his life, an escape he would find in the role of the comic bourgeois we call 'Chaucer the Pilgrim'" (Howard, Chaucer 401).

If Chaucer was going through rough times in his personal life, it would make sense that he would do some thinking about himself and what was happening to his world at that time in history and where he stood in relationship to the universe. Perhaps, Chaucer did examine the world around him and realized that it was changing and not

necessarily for the better. R. F. Yeager believes that because Chaucer is the only pilgrim to have two tales, he, as the poet, wanted his readers to remember something distinctive about him (114-5). Chaucer's world was definitely changing, and he might have wanted to record his feelings of these changes through his two tales. The tales give him the opportunity to say what he feels behind the mask of Chaucer, the pilgrim. He is able to distance himself. By doing this, the "upper classes might reasonably listen to what he has to say" (Scattergood 289).

However, some critics refuse to associate Chaucer, the poet, with Chaucer, the pilgrim, but this is not possible. "The two tales occur sequentially in the 'mind' of Geoffrey the Pilgrim only because they relate thematically in the mind of Chaucer the Poet, who, at last, earmarked them both for his fictive 'self' to tell" (Yeager 116-7). To give himself the two tales, reinforces his desire to explain what he believes to be the truth. Chaucer, the poet, possesses the ability to observe human nature and relay this with "irony, comedy, tragedy" (Haskell 258). As this observer, Chaucer tells what he sees through different modes of writing. In "Sir Thopas," he gives a very comic look of a knight, and in "Melibee," he gives a tragic story with a very serious debate.

By telling two types of tales, the serious and the comic, Chaucer creates two totally different characters with

different intentions. However, he makes the same point to his audience. In the beginning of "Melibee," Chaucer, the pilgrim, tells the others how the four gospels gave different views and stories of the life of Christ, but they tell the same story in the end (Olson 148). Chaucer is doing the same thing. He takes two different directions with his two tales only to end up at the same conclusion at the end (Yeager 17). The Host has interrupted him during "Sir Thopas," but he wants to continue with the same general effect. If he bores his audience with a romance that is a farce, he can tell a long, serious tale about peace, and this is exactly what he does in "Melibee." "It is in fact a very tactful introduction to a serious but artistically unsophisticated work, for as has been often observe, Melibee offers in effect pure 'doctrine' following upon Thopas' pure 'murthe'" (Olson 151). By reminding the pilgrims and the readers that the four gospels tell four different points of the life of Christ, Chaucer gives credibility to his own situation. The poet hopes that what worked in the New Testament writers will work for him.

What the tales themselves have to tell is basically a hope for peace. In "Tale of Sir Thopas," Chaucer starts by describing a knight from Flanders. All through the partial tale, the poet describes Thopas as a feminine knight who wears too much armor. For example, Chaucer writes: "The briddes synge, it is no nay,/ The sparhauk and the papejay,/

That joye it was to heere" (ll. 766-8). The poet writes of a lovely setting that the women of his time might have found very lovely; however, the scene does not give much credibility to a masculine knight. Also in the tale, the poet has Thopas swear on ale and bread (l. 872). This oath is a far cry from the rich objects on which a true knight would swear (Haskell 254). The pilgrims are expecting Chaucer, the pilgrim, to give a great rhyming romance that involves a great, aristocratic knight. Instead,

> "Sir Thopas" offers a comprehensive parody of the stylistic slackness and verbal poverty of minstrel romance and. . . by giving his romance an unheroic, mundane setting, and by making his hero the product of an urban bourgeois, mercantile and essentially contemporary culture, Chaucer is emphasizing the irrelevance in the late fourteenth century of the values romances traditionally celebrate. (Scattergood 289-90)

Chaucer did not like what was happening to chivalry. He gives examples of this in the "Knight's Tale" and the "Squire's Tale" by showing an overzealous knight and an overly-ambitious squire. Now the poet is showing the decline through a middle-class merchant from Flanders who does not know how to act chivalrous at all. The poet parodies the middle class knight against what the knightly estate had become and the literature that supported these

knights (Scattergood 291). Chaucer shows how ridiculous chivalry is becoming and the best way to do this is to show it to the noble class through the rising middle class.

By using "Sir Thopas" as an example of the failings of chivalry, Chaucer creates a puppet through the character of Sir Thopas. Chaucer, the poet, creates a puppet for him to control with Chaucer, the pilgrim, and Chaucer, the pilgrim, creates a puppet with Sir Thopas. "What better extension of the jest, then, than to portray Sir Thopas himself as a literal puppet of the puppet" (Haskell 253). When a person plays with a puppet, he or she forces the toy to do what the person wishes to convey his or her audience. In most instances, it is funny. However, Chaucer cleverly makes something that appears comic stand for something that is actually very serious. He forces Sir Thopas to appear to do many hilarious things when, in fact, Chaucer is trying to prove a point. Not only does Thopas do funny things, but like a puppet, he is also artificial. Thopas is artificial in his looks. Chaucer compares Thopas' complexion to a dye, not to an element in nature. In line 1917 of Thopas' tale, Chaucer writes that he was "lyk scarlet in grayn" (Haskell 254).

When the Host decides that he has heard enough of this parody, Chaucer announces that "I wol yow telle a litel thyng in prose" (l. 937). What he actually does is tell a very long sermon on the question of forgiveness and revenge.

Chaucer drops the idea of explaining the woes of chivalry and knighthood and goes in another direction. He has his main character Melibee debate whether to seek revenge on his daughter's attackers or to forgive them. In the end, he decides to follow his wife's council that peace in this particular situation would be better than war. Chaucer makes his statement that forgiveness for the sake of peace is far better than going to war to force peace. By going to war, only one side wins and the loser, like it or not, is forced to comply with the victor. "Chaucer's parody in 'Sir Thopas' seems. . . to be part of this same movement against the values of the warrior ethos. . . . And the values that 'Sir Thopas' implicitly disparages are those that 'Melibee' explicitly rejects" (Scattergood 291). Instead of having knights fight out their differences, Dame Prudence uses reason to show her husband that forgiveness is the better way (Bloomfield 67). His wife tells him: "Therefore o vengeaunce is nat warisshed by another vengeaunce, ne o wroong by another wroong" (l. 1285). Chaucer turns his back on the days when muscle was used to solve a conflict to the new days when, in theory, the mind was the better way to solve a conflict.

But why would Chaucer desire peace before war? The answer is simply that England had been fighting France for over fifty years. "'Sir Thopas' seems. . . to be part of Chaucer's case against continuing the French war: by making

him so thoroughly lacking in chivalric prowess, Chaucer is implicitly ridiculing the possibility of an Anglo-Flemish military alliance" (Scattergood 293-4). The war had already been going on for three years when Chaucer was born. Chaucer had never known England to be entirely at peace with France during his life. What had England really accomplished? She had gained some provinces; however, the Crown had not won Edward III's claim to the French throne. Henry V would not accomplish this until after his treaty with Charles VI in 1420 (Goodman 247). So Chaucer would never know a total peace with France. Yes, the English had great victories at Sluis, Poitiers and Crécy; however, England was unable to make any true, tangible advances in their cause against France. The advice that the old man gives to Melibee after he has been encouraged to seek revenge talks of all the disillusionments of war and begs Melibee for peace. The tale "mirrors" the disillusionments of the glory of war that many learned men were finding out for themselves in the fourteenth century (Barnie 133).

Chaucer was not the only person wanting peace with England's fiercest enemy. The person leading the cause was Richard II himself. "It could equally have been translated in support of the 'court party' and Richard's policy of peace with France, for 'Melibee' reveals a profound distrust of war and the evils which stem from it" (Barnie 133). As a person within Richard's court, Chaucer might have seen

himself as an influence on the king. Perhaps Chaucer saw himself as Dame Prudence. John Barnie believes that several passages in the tale are related to the 1370s and 1380s. Furthermore, when Prudence warns her husband of whom Melibee should trust as his counsilors, Chaucer is actually giving advice to Richard II on the selection of his own advisors (132). The poet had been a trusted worker for the king's grandfather and for the young king, and perhaps he saw himself as a person whom the king could trust with advice concerning France. Perhaps "Thopas" and "Melibee" were used to hint and to influence Richard II. Chaucer's "opinions. . . are sufficient to align him with his friend and others whose disillusionment with the course of the war led them to advocate peace as the only sure basis for a stable society" (Barnie 132). Yes, knights did serve their country and their king through battles, but Chaucer wishes to serve his through the advice that peace is better and that "a concern for military glory is vain and futile, at times, indeed, rather foolish" (Scattergood 292).

Chaucer as a member of court realized first hand what was happening to England during the Hundred Years War. He saw the inefficiencies of the military and how violent they had become. He had seen the Crusades cause men to forget the original purpose of the wars only to prefer a world of exotic luxury that the east had to offer them. He saw chivalry decline into this decadence and fade away until

it was no longer recognizable. Men of all classes had become knights. To help salvage what was left of England, Chaucer was determined to do all he could do. The best way for him to do this was through the Canterbury Tales. In his stories, the poet shows what has happened to the once illustrious knights who fought for their lady's love and for the glory of God. He also writes of how a Squire followed the new idea that chivalry could plunge itself into the exotic East, and Chaucer pleads for peace with France by showing a foppish knight and a distressed father realizing that forgiveness was better than war.

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